

Shawn Hogendorf, *Hudson Patch*

Four U.S. senators introduced bipartisan legislation Friday that will move the proposed St. Croix River crossing forward—exempting the project from a federal law that protects the river.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), sponsored the bill, and Sen. Al Franken (D-Minn.), Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wis.) and Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) each signed on to the legislation that, if passed, would be the first exemption for a bridge over a river protected by the U.S. Wild and Scenic River's Act of 1968.

"This is probably the most significant development in 25 years on this project," said Ken Harycki, Stillwater's mayor and co-chair of the Coalition for the St. Croix River Crossing. "This is a very important step forward, but it is also important to remember that this is the first of many steps along the way."

While the project leaps forward with the introduction of the Senate bill, Rep. Betty McCollum (D-Minn.) continues to oppose the "\$700 million mega-bridge."

"This Senate legislation is a disappointment," McCollum said in a statement. "It achieves exactly the same outcome as Congresswoman (Michele) Bachmann's bill by removing protections for taxpayers in favor of an excessively large and costly bridge that overwhelmingly benefits Wisconsin."

This proposal authorizes a freeway-style bridge that is currently prohibited by the National Park Service because it violates the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, McCollum stated.

Bachmann (R- Minn.) introduced HR 850—a similar bill to Klobuchar's, which McCollum also opposes—on March 1 in the U.S. House of Representatives that was cosponsored by Rep. Sean Duffy (R-Wis.) Rep. Ron Kind (D-Wis.) and Rep. Chip Cravaack (R-Minn.).

"This Senate bill doesn't change any of the facts or answer any of the concerns voiced by local officials and residents about this project," McCollum said. "The Senate bill puts Minnesota taxpayers on the hook to fund the most expensive bridge ever built in the history of our state."

But the Senate bill did gain Franken's support, who until Friday hadn't taken a position on the river-crossing project.

"While I don't think the proposed four-lane bridge is a perfect bridge by any means, the people of Stillwater and the St. Croix Valley need a new bridge, and one that can be built without further years of delay," Franken said in a statement. "I would have preferred a less-expensive option, but this is the bridge that's been chosen through a decades-long process, and I support its construction."

But his support didn't come without reservation.

"While the waiver process is consistent with the language in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, this would be the first exemption for a bridge over a river covered by the law," Franken said. "I certainly don't want this to signal an open season on the Act."

Traffic issues are another concern McCollum has voiced over the project.

If the traffic projections are accurate, McCollum said, the four-lane bridge proposal would push tens of thousands of semi-trailers and cars into the Minnesota Highway 36 corridor, "which is already at capacity."

"This mega-bridge legislation is a fiscally irresponsible bipartisan plan that creates a transportation nightmare for residents along Minnesota Highway 36," Klobuchar said. "Its language ignores much less expensive bridge options that meet the needs of Stillwater residents and comply with federal law—fiscally responsible options I strongly support."

But the funding and traffic arguments flow both ways.

Business increases in many of the boutiques, restaurants and drinking establishments in downtown Stillwater when the lift bridge is closed, Harycki said. That's because more Stillwater residents go downtown when there is less traffic, he said.

The traffic congestion in downtown Stillwater "flows like water" sending drivers into Stillwater neighborhoods (such as the South Hill on their way to Highway 36), which not only increases traffic in neighborhoods, but also increases road-repair costs, Harycki said.

The bridge, as it ages, has been closed more frequently in recent years for structural and vehicle-collision repairs, as well as maintenance inspections, Klobuchar said.

When the lift bridge is closed, traffic on downtown Hudson's small roads increases, said John Soderberg, the Wisconsin co-chair of the coalition. The I-94 bridge in Hudson can't take another 18,000 -25,000 vehicles a day, he said.

"If that is going on every day, it would be important to have more than one exit," Soderberg said. "Hudson business owners have been very tolerant of this situation."

"St Croix County has been growing faster than any other place in our state," Kohl said. "That kind of growth necessitates investment on a similar scale. We must have infrastructure that is safe and reflective of the needs of our communities."

According to reports by the Department of Transportation, the I-94 bridge between Minnesota and Wisconsin will be at capacity in 2019, Harycki said. "Four lanes are adequate for this river crossing," he added.

Klobuchar said the senators consulted the Department of Transportation and National Park Service on the legislation, which also contains a package of mitigation efforts to protect the scenic St. Croix River as agreed to in 2006. That package includes a loop trail over the Lift Bridge when it is closed to traffic, removing some buildings, and protecting and restoring the river bluff and park lands.

"This important legislation brings a needed St. Croix River crossing closer to becoming a reality for the residents of Minnesota and Wisconsin," Bachmann said.

The commitment by both Minnesota senators to a new crossing can only strengthen the resolve of area residents to continue to work in Washington, D.C., to gain approval for the bridge, said Gary Kriesel, Washington County Commissioner for District 3.

"This is another step in realizing our goal of building a new bridge between us and our neighbors in Wisconsin," Kriesel said, "and relieving downtown Stillwater and an outdated bridge of daily commuter traffic."

"We're not scheduling a ground breaking," Harycki said of the legislation, "but I do expect it to pass."